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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0611
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1247
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1883
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000749

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2018
TAGS: [PHUM KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEK TV DOCUMENTARY BASHES JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES
AND PROTESTANT GROUPS

REF: A. 06 TASHKENT 2369
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 708

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A recent hour-long broadcast on Uzbek state television highlighted the "illegal missionary activity" of Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal churches, and appeared to be designed to discredit those groups and inspire fear of and disdain for their activities. In 2006, the airing of a similar documentary directed at Christian evangelicals on state television was followed by physical attacks against members of featured churches (ref A). During his recent visit to Uzbekistan, Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford watched a copy of the documentary and raised his concern with the Religious Affairs Committee Chairman (ref B). After Hanford's visit, the MFA sent to the Embassy a copy of another Uzbek documentary, covering religious diversity and tolerance in Uzbekistan. While the government tolerates many different faiths, it is significantly less tolerant of evangelical religious minorities that proselytize within ethnic Uzbek communities, as demonstrated by the recent airing of the Uzbek television documentary. End summary.

"IN THE CLUTCHES OF IGNORANCE"

[1](#)2. (SBU) A recent hour-long broadcast on Uzbek state television entitled "In the Clutches of Ignorance" highlighted the "illegal missionary activity" of certain religious groups in Uzbekistan, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal churches, and appeared to be designed to discredit those groups and inspire fear of and disdain for their missionary activities. The program repeatedly accused missionaries of employing illegal means to attract new members, including offering money to recruits and using psychotropic drugs and hypnosis. Additionally, the program accused missionary groups of citing Muslim and Christian prophets and verses from the Bible and Koran in efforts to draw new recruits away from "mainstream" religions, and it

also charged missionaries with using nuances of Uzbek tradition, folklore, and language in order to appeal to new recruits. The program further claimed that missionaries targeted youth and the mentally handicapped for recruitment. Two groups received special attention in the video: the Full Gospel Church and the Blagodat ("Grace") Church.

CHURCH ACCUSED OF TARGETING YOUTH, MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

13. (SBU) The television program began by turning its strong, anti-missionary message on the Full Gospel Church. The documentary repeatedly accused the church of psychologically manipulating its members during religious services, including through hypnosis. In one interview, a purported psychiatric expert said that the church targeted youth because of their particular susceptibility to psychological manipulation. The expert also said that a study of new recruits found many to be mentally ill and others to be "spiritually weak" or "too simple" to resist recruitment. The program also charged that church missionaries lured new members by claiming the ability to cure sickness through prayer, citing a case in which a young boy was cured of a headache during a religious ceremony. The program aired grainy footage of a religious service that showed members singing and dancing and commented that such services caused members to become "like zombies." At one point, the program said that followers of their group had lost their roots in society and were ready at any time to betray their brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. Footage included an interview with one alleged member of the church who refused to leave the group at her father's urging.

The program noted that "people like her who betray their father will be ready tomorrow to sell the fatherland."

14. (SBU) In another interview, Metropolitan Vladimir, the Tashkent-based leader of the Russian Orthodox Church in Central Asia, discredited the Full Gospel Church as a fraud, accusing its leaders of lying to local populations. The Russian Orthodox leader said that instead of offering religious groups like the Full Gospel Church protection from government authorities, they should be punished.

15. (SBU) The program also focused in detail on three missionaries of the Full Gospel Church: Turdiyev Jasor Hamroyevich, a 30-year-old ethnic Uzbek from Kazakhstan, referred to in the program as the group's senior missionary in Uzbekistan; Annetta Boshoff, a 60-year-old South African missionary who reportedly helped establish the church in Uzbekistan and has since been deported; and Toshmatov Dilshod Jorayevich, a 28-year-old Uzbek reported by the program to be a member of "Iso Masih," an active missionary group of the church. The program noted that Jorayevich has been charged and fined by an administrative court for his illegal activities (Note: We are unable to confirm whether this is the case. End note.)

PROGRAM ACCUSES CHURCH OF USING DRUGS TO RECRUIT MEMBERS

16. (SBU) The program also singled out the religious group Blagodat ("Grace" or the "Greater Grace Church") for criticism. The documentary noted that Blagodat leaders arrived in Tashkent in 1999 and purchased a movie theater building as the group's religious headquarters. In September 2007 Uzbekistan's Supreme Economic Court reportedly found the deal illegal and cancelled Blagodat's contract.

17. (SBU) According to the program, Blagodat initially focused recruitment on the ethnic Korean population but recently expanded proselytizing efforts to reach the ethnic Russian, Tatar, Kazakh and Uzbek communities. The program reported that Blagodat's headquarters are in Los Angeles and that unnamed "American billionaires" donate funds to help Blagodat spread its message worldwide.

18. (SBU) The program leveled repeated charges against Blagodat members of using psychotropic drugs to recruit new

worshippers. The program aired black-and-white footage that purported to show a large amount of religious literature and medical substances confiscated by GOU officials during an inspection of Blagodat's premises. The program reported that forensic studies showed some of the medicines to be past their expiration date, and it alleged that others had "psychotropic properties" (Comment: These allegations have been made before in the state-controlled press. The state-controlled "Gorizont" newspaper published articles on January 11, 2008, and October 22, 2007, charging that Blagodat members conducted illegal missionary work and "hypnotized" people with psychotropic drugs. Another state-controlled newspaper, "Narodnoe Slovo," reprinted the second "Gorizont" article on January 15, 2008. This pattern follows the practice of previous campaigns against suspected missionaries: in 2006, a series of articles in the state-controlled press reinforced the message of a state television program entitled "Hypocrisy" that warned the public of the dangers of associating with evangelical Christians. Shortly after the "Hypocrisy" program was shown on Uzbek television, a Pentecostal Church Deacon was beaten in Tashkent, see ref A. End comment.)

¶9. (SBU) According to the program, GOU authorities have opened a criminal investigation into Blagodat's activities and have charged two women, including one unnamed AmCit, and

two men, a church director and a pastor, under several articles of the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan. The program reported that the AmCit left Uzbekistan in secret and that GOU authorities have since designated her as a "wanted person" (Comment: We are unable to confirm the identity of the AmCit or whether she is wanted by authorities. Furthermore, although the program suggested that the criminal investigation is ongoing, other reliable sources indicate that the charges, brought in January 2008, have been dropped. Regular worship services of the Greater Grace Church ceased in March 2008 after the Church received a warning letter from the hokimyat (local administration) of Tashkent's Khamza district. End comment.)

¶10. (SBU) The program also singled out an alleged Blagodat missionary, Nariman Ismailov, and accused him of being a "serious, dangerous criminal" who supposedly was involved in a robbery and with drugs before joining the church. The program claimed that Ismailov earned a significant salary in return for recruiting new members in Ferghana Province.

¶11. (SBU) After showing more footage of religious services, the program's commentator said, "I think the whole of this material is enough for you to understand that behind these eyes, these smiles, are evil intentions." "We are a very patient nation," the commentator said in reference to the missionaries' activities, "but every nation has its limits."

HANFORD WATCHES DOCUMENTARY, RAISES CONCERN WITH OFFICIALS

¶12. (C) During a May 28-31 visit to Uzbekistan, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford viewed the documentary and also raised his concern during a meeting with Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Ortik Yusupov. Hanford explained that such programs could potentially increase social prejudices against religious minorities and fuel intolerance. Yusupov responded that he had seen the documentary, and remarked that Uzbekistan did not censor its mass media. He also accused the groups depicted in the film of proselytizing, which is against Uzbek law, and argued that the point of the documentary was to encourage all such organizations to follow Uzbek law. He also explained that his office receives a large number of letters from ordinary citizens, complaining that they received unsolicited approaches by Christian missionaries. Yusupov stressed that the government's religion policy was aimed at preserving harmony between Uzbekistan's different religions and avoiding social conflict (ref B).

¶13. (C) Hanford also discussed the documentary with Uzbek

historian and religious scholar Bakhtiyor Babadjanov, who appears in the documentary and is quoted as stating that most missionary activities are "funded from outside Uzbekistan," and that "missionary activities have become...a tool...for exerting political influence, advancing one's own interests, no matter whether it is economic or political." When asked about his participation in the documentary, Babadjanov defended his remarks, though he also said he was unaware of the documentary's intent when he was interviewed and had no hand in its production. He also dismissed the documentary as government propaganda. Nevertheless, Babadjanov was strongly critical of Christian groups he believed were engaged in proselytizing. Babadjanov contended that "Uzbekistan is not Switzerland" and that Uzbeks do not tolerate the presence of missionaries in their country, which he believed had the potential to cause social unrest (septel).

MFA SENDS COPY OF FILM CELEBRATING CULTURE OF TOLERANCE

¶14. (SBU) After Hanford's visit, the MFA sent to the Embassy

a copy of another half-hour documentary, entitled "Under One Sky" and produced by the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, which celebrates the country's religious diversity and tolerance (Comment: The English-language film is clearly targeted at foreign audiences and appears aimed at countering accusations that the government persecutes religious minorities. Indeed, the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Belgium reportedly screened "Under One Sky" on May 22 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. End comment.)

¶15. (SBU) "Under One Sky" features a mix of historical and cultural anecdotes that trace the roots and influence of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism in Uzbekistan, interspersing those anecdotes with commentary on the long history of peaceful coexistence between religions in the country. The film also emphasizes that Uzbekistan's people enjoy widespread freedom of religion, noting at one point that "all citizens of Uzbekistan, whatever their nationality or religion...without any restrictions... perform their religious rights and pray peacefully." The film also includes interviews with local religious leaders of the major faiths, all attesting to Uzbekistan's culture of religious tolerance and stating variously that "there has been no persecution on the grounds of religion" and that "great credit goes to the government and personally to the President in that respect."

¶16. (SBU) Interestingly, "Under One Sky" paid significant attention to Buddhism and noted that the first Buddhist temple in Uzbekistan opened in November 2001 in Tashkent. (Comment: Noticeably absent from the film, though, was any reference to the small Christian denominations that were featured prominently in the Uzbek television documentary. End comment.)

Comment

¶17. (C) "Under One Sky" rightly acknowledges a long history of major faiths peacefully coexisting in Uzbekistan. To a significant degree, that peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance continues today. Many people enjoy considerable freedom to follow their chosen faith in Uzbekistan, and, in large part, Uzbek society remains relatively tolerant of different faiths, including religious minorities. Nonetheless, its repeated denials that worshippers face no restrictions on the practice of their chosen religion are not fully accurate. As highlighted by the "Clutches of Ignorance" documentary shown on Uzbek television, the government is significantly less tolerant of evangelical religious minorities, particularly those that proselytize within ethnic Uzbek communities. We are concerned that such a documentary appears aimed at increasing social prejudices against such groups, which could result in violence against them, as appears to have been the case following the showing

of a similar documentary in 2006. Additionally, the documentary's video footage of religious services confirms our suspicions of relatively extensive government operations to infiltrate and electronically monitor minority and unregistered religious groups.

¶18. (C) As statements that Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Yusupov and historian and religious scholar Babadjanov made to Hanford indicate, the government appears to link proselytism, whether by Muslim or Christian missionaries, with the potential for social unrest, which they seek to avoid at all costs, especially in the wake of the 2005 Andijon events. Ironically, the showing of a documentary like the "Clutches of Ignorance" video has the potential to cause just the sort of social unrest the government intends to avoid. We need to convince the

government that showing such documentaries is counterproductive, and that the key to preserving social stability is ceasing, not increasing, the harassment of minority religious congregations. Negotiations underway between Ambassador Hanford and the government on Uzbekistan's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) status offer another opportunity to do this.

NORLAND